

Intranet Art: *Alethicorp* & the Satire of Protocol

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INTRODUCTION

Despite being well received by the IF community, including a nomination for Best Use of Innovation at the XYXXY Awards in 2014, Simon Christansen's game *AlethiCorp* (2014) has attracted very little critical attention. Yet the game offers an important critical reading not only of digital capitalism's 'structure of feeling', but of the specific textual strategies that its author employs, in order to convey this reading to the game's players. Through the device of a most unlikely medium, the corporate intranet, *AlethiCorp* is an art game with a serious purpose, which it achieves by switching players back and forth between, on the one hand, its philosophical and political themes and, on the other, attention to aspects of the technical constraints Galloway (2006) terms "protocol".

As a satire of post-Snowden corporate knowledge management and surveillance culture, *AlethiCorp* is more than simply clever interactive fiction. Playing the game as a "Junior Information Management Consultant", one must choose whether to snitch on potentially innocent people; whether to submit to or resist the neoliberal corporate environment; whether to make contact with the mole ostensibly working to bring down *AlethiCorp* from within; and, above all, what dish to bring to the team potluck dinner.

AlethiCorp uses the corporate intranet as a device to position players within a tension between political realism and the constraints (and humourous subversions) of its web interface. Making contact with those working to bring down the evil corporates involves exploiting an out of date browser and hacking a URL in a corporate training system. Like net.art (such as, for instance, Alexei Shulgin's *Form Art* (1997)) it subverts web interfaces elements, but it does so for narrative as well as aesthetic or entertainment reasons. The game makes frequent use of web forms and form validation to subvert logic,

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parody corporate culture, or reveal secret messages, and thus highlights the protocol-based aspects of its text.

As satire, the game bounces players between a desire become an “off-gaming thinker” (Lee 2003), and a need to pay attention to the technical protocols or mechanisms in order to progress through the game. Galloway's formulation of protocol is “based on a contradiction between two opposing machines [namely, TCP/IP and DNS]: One machine radically distributes control into autonomous locales, the other machine focuses control into rigidly defined hierarchies. The tension between these two machines . . . creates a hospitable climate for protocological control” (8). I suggest that satire in games like *AlethiCorp* extends the scope of realism as a critical genre by connecting everyday practices to the social totality” (Martin 2016). In this way *AlethiCorp* becomes an effective primer on the difficulties of navigating towards “counter-protocological” practices within societies of control.

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